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RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000035

G FOR LAURA PENA AND DAVID YOUNG

G/TIP FOR MARK TAYLOR AND SHEELA AHLUWALIA

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: KERALA AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT PARTNER TO PROTECT MIGRANTS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Kerala, located on India's southwestern tip, has long been the source of massive overseas migration, with more than 2.5 million of the state's 31 million people working overseas, mostly in the Gulf countries. The migrant community's political clout led the government of Kerala to establish the Department of Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs (NORKA) in 1996, the first such state government agency charged with the express mandate of protecting overseas Indians. NORKA is a small, but effective agency that implements a wide range of migrant protection programs and interventions both at home and overseas. For its overseas interventions, NORKA works collaboratively with the Government of India's Ministries of External Affairs and Overseas Indian Affairs to provide assistance to Keralite migrants. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Kerala, a state at the southwestern tip of India, has long been a source of substantial overseas migration. The state's historically weak economy creates little in terms of job opportunities at home so an estimated 2.5 million of the state's 31 million people work abroad, mostly in the Gulf countries. Their annual remittances of \$5 billion increase the state's economic output by over 25%, forming a major pillar of its economy. About 40% of the expatriate community is Muslim, hailing from a few districts in northern Kerala. The size and economic clout of the migrant community makes them and their families in Kerala a substantial political force. As a result, the government of Kerala has made the welfare of the Non-Resident Keralites (NRK) a major priority.

First of its kind in India

¶3. (U) The Government of Kerala established the Department of Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs (NORKA) in December 1996, the first of its kind in an Indian state. NORKA has a wide mandate. It provides assistance to NRKs in distress abroad, in collaboration with Indian Embassies and Consulates, and protects NRKs from harassment by their employers/sponsors. NORKA seeks to prevent recruiting agents from cheating job-seekers and resolves the grievances between agents and NRKs. NORKA traces missing persons abroad, provides educational facilities for NRK children, lobbies Air India for the introduction of more flights, and assists with the rehabilitation of returnees. MM Hassan, a senior Kerala Congress party leader and former Minister in the state government, told post that NORKA's success inspired the central government to create the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs.

¶4. (U) In 2002, NORKA formed a non-profit company, NORKA-Roots, to work as its field agency, interfacing with the community. It has regional offices in Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi, and Kozhikode (all in Kerala) as well as Mumbai and Delhi. The state's Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan serves as the Chairman of NORKA Roots and Manojkumar, Government Secretary for NORKA functions as the Company's Vice Chairman.

¶5. (SBU) With only a dozen employees, NORKA is a relatively small operation but NORKA-Roots substantially augments the pure governmental effort with another 70 employees located throughout the state. NORKA Secretary Manojkumar is an officer of the Indian Administrative Service who also serves as the Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister. Keeping the NORKA portfolio with the Chief Minister's personal staff demonstrates the political importance attached to defending the NRK community. Manojkumar told post that NORKA-Roots is able to raise its own resources mostly through fees it charges for the authentication of documents required by overseas employers. But the government of Kerala also provides direct grants to NORKA-Roots for conducting training projects.

¶6. (SBU) Mohan Kumar, the recently departed CEO of NORKA-Roots told us that NORKA plays a big role in preventing trafficking of women and employee harassment. According to the ex-CEO, "tens of thousands of petitions flow to our regional offices and most of them are about sponsors' harassment." He expressed satisfaction with the Government of India's assistance: "our Embassies and Consulates effectively intervene as soon as we pass the information we gather through petitions," he said. He told us that NORKA-Roots arranges pre-departure briefings and training sessions for job seekers. NORKA also runs awareness campaigns on the perils of illegal migration.

Stories of intervention and rescue

¶7. (SBU) Mohan Kumar cited the story of a group of six youths who

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were rescued from St. Petersburg, Russia in July 2009 suffering in terrible living conditions after having been cheated and stranded by a recruiter. The students went to Russia on tourist visas, but were promised lucrative jobs. NORKA, with the support of the Government of India's Ministry of Overseas Indians Affairs, rescued and repatriated them to Kerala. Mohan Kumar also said that NORKA played a role in repatriating 34 Keralite construction workers from Libya where they were stuck after their contracts with an Indonesian firm expired.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: The fact that virtually every family in Kerala relies at least in part on migration for its livelihood has created an unusually strong political lobby that pressures the government to be proactive on migrants' behalf. NORKA, however, does not do it alone. The Ministries of External Affairs and Overseas Indian Affairs -- especially the staff of India's Embassies and Consulates -- are key partners that enable NORKA to execute its interventions abroad. Both ministries also play critical roles in negotiating the GOI's labor agreements with Middle Eastern governments that help provide protections for Indian migrant workers. NORKA's work on behalf of Keralite migrants, a substantial percentage of India's overall overseas population, is an example of successful intragovernmental cooperation for migrant protection and advocacy. End comment.

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